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Extension program moves on DIRECTOR JIMMY HENNING STEPS INTO POST OF FALLEN FRIEND

By Megan Boehnke
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Ben Meredith was a rookie extension agent in Elliott County when his boss made the two-hour drive from Lexington to see him last year.

Meredith gave Jimmy Henning a tour of the county. He spent the day talking to the UK College of Agriculture administrator about his successes in the county, the questions he got from farmers there and what new opportunities were available in the rural Eastern Kentucky community.

"He understands the challenges we face in the county office," Meredith said. "He's not a behind-the-desk kind of person, but he's willing to come out. And he knows the job and is interested in working with our farmers and our clientele."

Those statewide visits with emphasis on interaction with communities on the local level are the things Henning



MATT GOINS

Henning. Photo by Matt Goins

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will continue to champion as he takes over as the new associate dean and director for extension. Henning, who has been at UK since 1989, is taking over for Larry Turner, who died in the Aug. 27 crash of Comair Flight 5191.

UK's Cooperative Extension Program has an office in every county of the state, making research and work done on campus available to local farmers and others in the community to apply to their lives. The network of more than 400 agents in communities across the state and about 100 specialists who work near or on campus is closely connected, making Turner's death felt all across the state.

"It was a devastating blow," said Meredith, who is now an agent in Woodford County. Though Meredith didn't know Turner on a personal level, he met him on several occasions and interviewed with him for his agent position.

"It's a family-type environment, and when one person hurts, we all share in that," Meredith said. "It was a really tough time, but in other ways, it brought the extensions and Ag College together."

As the associate dean for extension since 2002, Turner started the "Re-envisioning Extension" effort to make the service more efficient and effective. He also helped bring the nation's first fine arts extension office to Pike County and sought aid in addressing the state's drug problems.

"I think it's like losing a family member," Henning said. "Some people are a good bit removed from Lexington, and they may not have had that day to day contact with him. But if you met him once, you sort of felt like you were part of his family."

Henning and Turner started their careers at UK close to the same time, worked together and traveled together.

"I worked with Larry almost from the first day he came here," Henning said. "He was an engineer who took care of livestock. We went to grazing schools together, would room together from time to time, so I knew him very well."

On Aug. 27, when Henning first heard about the plane crash on the radio, he had to pull his car off the road. It was almost 9 a.m., and he was on his way to church. He knew someone from the College of Agriculture had to be on the plane. A group of 10 to 15 people was flying to Puerto Rico for a conference, taking different flights out of Blue Grass Airport over the weekend.

It wasn't long after 1 p.m. that Sunday, the time when Henning was supposed to be boarding a plane himself, that he heard from a co-worker that his good friend was on the flight.

"It was so sudden and so traumatic that I don't think I believed it," Henning said.

That's why, when he was approached about applying for Turner's vacant position several months later, he hesitated.

"I thought about that a lot, and just why this was so difficult, because it's what Larry prepared us to do," Henning said. "He prepared us to go ahead and move on and grow into these things. But I think I just expected to see him walk around the corner every day."

Henning wrestled with whether to apply for weeks, he said. Finally, he decided it was right.

"I told the committee they need to find the best person in the country to have this spot," Henning said. "If it's me that's fine, if it's not that's fine."

Name: Jimmy C. Henning
Start date: May 7
Hometown: Guymon, Okla.
Age: 49

Family: Wife, Faye, and daughter, Anna
Degrees: Bachelor's and master's degrees in agronomy (the study of soil management and crop production) from University of Georgia; doctorate in agronomy and animal science from UK.

Career: Associate dean and associate director for UK extension service, 2003-'06; assistant director for agriculture and natural resources at UK in 2003; agronomy faculty member and forages (animal feed) specialist at UK, 1989-2003; extension forages specialist at University of Missouri, 1986-'89



College of Agriculture Dean Scott Smith told the department after Turner's death that he would "wait until it feels right before we move on," Henning said.

When that time came after the first of the year, Henning was a popular choice to replace his former friend and boss, Smith said.

"Jimmy's a very likable person, easy-going," Smith said. "I think he emerged as the natural choice based upon his leadership skill, experience, familiarity with Kentucky's issues and his widespread credibility as a spokesman for extension services."

Henning grew up watching his father as an extension agent in southwest Georgia. Though he didn't know what extension services were then, he knew he wanted to be just like his father.

"What I saw was my father loved the job," Henning said. "He was sold out to helping people, and I got all of that gene."

Bringing useful research done on campus to the people in the state and building strong relationships with communities are some of Henning's goals as he starts his new role that includes leading more than 1,000 employees. He wants to grow the arts extension program and continue to develop UK's new Equine Initiative.

"Certainly we want to take care of thoroughbred industry because it's our number one cash industry, but it's more than that," Henning said. "There are pleasure horses all across the state, and it's a new and exciting group of clients who maybe thought we were just about cows and corn and canning and the traditional things."

"We can draw on the resources of the entire university," Henning said. "The extension offices are the university's storefront, and those arts extension offices are great examples of that."

And though it's been a difficult year for the extension services, Henning said he thinks those in the program have come together in pushing forward.

"I think it's a tribute to Larry that he prepared people to lead in his absence," he said. "I think Larry would be proud that we're working his plan and taking advantage of new opportunities that present themselves. We hope he's proud."



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